

MAJOR GENERAL LARRY LAFRENTZ, IDAHO ADJUTANT GENERAL

Statement of
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Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this committee to share what we in the Idaho Guard are doing to prepare for the return of our mobilized soldiers. Allow me to note that while the 116th BCT is comprised primarily of Idahoans, there are another two thousand Guard Members serving with the BCT from other states such as Oregon, Montana, Utah, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey to name a few.

In addition to deploying the 116th BCT, Idaho continues to support OIF and OEF missions with the 189th Airlift Squadron and the 124th Aerial Port Flight. We recently alerted and will mobilize another two hundred plus soldiers in the 1-183rd Attack Aviation Battalion in October.

I'll begin by saying that in all entitlement areas ? medical care, benefits and services ? we must put great effort into the dissemination of information. It does little good to be poised to provide a benefit when the veteran is unaware it exists.

Healthcare issues are at the top of my list of concerns. In order to access some healthcare services, soldiers must disclose all illnesses and injuries on their Post-Deployment Health Assessment forms. These citizen-soldiers will have been away from home for nearly 18 months. They are anxious to return and may be tempted to remain quiet about an ailment or injury for fear it will delay their return. This situation is being addressed by Commanders on the ground in Iraq. Likewise, we are informing family members that soldiers who do not declare their medical issues risk not being able to receive care or benefits for those conditions. This concern will also be addressed during the demobilization process at Fort Lewis.

Another healthcare concern is the availability of services for Guard members who reside outside the major population centers in the state. The Veteran's Hospital system is an excellent resource for us, especially here in southwest Idaho. I am grateful for the additional funding provided by Congress to improve facilities this year and to add staff in the next fiscal year. I am sure our returning soldiers will benefit from this. Soldiers residing away from the Boise Valley are not so fortunate. The state is serviced by three other VA Hospital regions which include Salt Lake City in the east and Walla Walla and Spokane in the north. It would be very helpful if we could utilize local healthcare providers in our outlying areas. We are working with the VA to resolve this concern.

Lastly, with respect to health care, I would like to address dental support. Many soldiers will reach the demobilization center needing treatment they are entitled to but have been unable to get while in Iraq. We can do this with systems already in place through the VA Medical Centers and we are working to get the information to the soldiers and coordinate with the medical centers. So far I have highlighted my concerns about Idaho's returning Guard members and their families. Idaho's employers have been greatly impacted by this mobilization and, for the most part, they have reacted with overwhelming support. I would like to offer employers a training package that helps them prepare for the return of a soldier who has just spent the past year in a war zone. A training package such as this is not available and so we are working with ESGR and other organizations to put one together that can be exported around the state.

I have outlined my concerns for the returning 116th BCT soldiers and would now like to address

what we are doing in Idaho to assist our returning soldiers:

We have opened Family Assistance Centers with funding from the National Guard Bureau in seven armories around the state. These centers are run by family members and retired Guardsmen. They maintain contact with community resources and keep up-to-date information on all the programs we know about that can help our soldiers and families. I expect these centers to become the local service centers for our veterans and their families who do not have a nearby VA office.

At the beginning of the year, we began conducting meetings among soldier and veterans' advocates. The Idaho Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee is led by a senior Idaho Guard staff member and is comprised of members from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA Medical Center, the State Division of Veterans Services, the Vet Center, the US Department of Labor, the State Department of Commerce and Labor and the Department of Health and Welfare, as well as other service organizations. This group meets monthly and shares ideas and information regarding benefits and programs.

This spring I went around the state with my staff, conducting seven town hall meetings to visit family members and to learn about their concerns and problems. The second round of meetings is being expanded to include eleven cities. We conducted the first of these at Gowen Field July 23rd. It was well attended and included briefings by those same State and Federal veterans' advocates and service providers who are members of the Idaho Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee. In addition to these town hall meetings, we are placing information and Web site links on our family support web site. We are also producing a resource guide and working with 2-1-1 Idaho Care Line; Idaho's Information and Referral hotline. I want to prepare families as much as is possible so that when a question arises, they are not at a loss for what to do or who to call for support.

When our Guardsmen mobilized, most lost civilian medical insurance benefits. During deployment, the soldiers and their families have been covered by TRICARE. Our ongoing issue in Idaho is finding available TRICARE providers. While great improvements were made to enroll providers at the beginning of our deployment, there are still areas in the state that are not well covered. We are now hearing from our families that physicians will continue to care for existing TRICARE patients, but will take no more. This is a significant problem for us in light of our future mobilizations.

Here in Idaho, we coordinated with the TRICARE Education Representative and had a three-day course to train our own people to assist our families with their enrollment and service questions. We would very much like to see TRICARE invest in a service center here at in Boise to support not only the returning soldiers, but those now beginning their deployment cycle. We are now in the process of filing our request to host such a service center.

During the demobilization process itself, we will focus resources at the demobilization center. A team of soldiers representing administrative and medical experts will be there to review records to make sure they are properly completed and that soldiers are taking advantage of every service and benefit offered. Where it makes sense, the Idaho team will also include representatives from the agencies and organization that belong to our Inter-Service Family Assistance Committee, or their counterparts located near the demobilization center. Before soldiers leave the demobilization center, they will be given a list of people and resources they can call for help once they are back home.

After the soldiers return home our efforts will focus on helping them reintegrate. We will continue to conduct town hall meetings focusing on follow up and service access. I plan to

continue this program for at least eighteen months after their return. Marriage enrichment weekends, funded by the National Guard Bureau Family Program and organized by the State Chaplain, will also be provided to all married soldiers.

Mr. Chairman, again I thank you for this time to speak before the Committee. I am grateful for your sincere concern for the citizen-soldiers who will soon be returning home to Idaho and to our neighboring states.